

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Extension Service  
Washington 25, D. C.

PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION AND THE EXTENSION SERVICE

by  
Dale E. Hathaway 1/



As society advances it becomes more and more interdependent. Nowhere is this more evident than in its impact upon the farmer. Now as never before the farm family's happiness, health, well-being, and prosperity depends upon decisions made far from the farm. The farmer is unable to control these decisions directly, but he must be ready and able to play a democratic part in their making.

To take his part in decision making in a democracy the individual must be equipped and prepared to make a decision. All of these individual decisions then become a part of the dynamic process of Government. But, unless the individual is willing to make his decision and defend it, special groups stand willing to do it for him, often not in his best interest. If he is not able to analyze the consequences of the policy he chooses, the voter may find himself saddled with a policy, Government or private, which brings undesirable results.

The people are searching for places where they may get unbiased information that will aid them in making these vital policy decisions. One source that has come forward in many States has been the Cooperative Extension Service. This is shown by excerpts from the annual reports of two States.

One State that has been doing this work for several years reports, "Many leading rural people are accustomed to look far beyond their fence lines and their local community. They see that to be a good citizen in the modern world requires a broad understanding of public problems. More and more, they have been asking the Extension Service to help them in this field of understanding."

Another State with a rather extensive program in public policy education reports, "A survey of county agricultural agents reveals that the program presented by this project is meeting with enthusiastic approval at the county and local levels. It is recorded in these surveys that the program 'is contributing to a more intelligent understanding of the public issues of the day on the part of the citizens of the State and is gaining much prestige for the Extension Service'."

There is a rapidly growing demand for such work throughout the country. Many of the States' extension services are now doing what they call "public affairs education" or "public policy education."

While many States have long carried on discussions of local or community problems on an informal basis this report does not attempt to cover this work. This dis-

1/ Mr. Hathaway, on leave from Michigan State College, was employed by the Federal Extension Service for 3 months to assist in the development of background material for public policy education. These comments indicate some of his thoughts as to the problems facing workers in this field and the present status of the work, growing out of his experience as a State specialist working in this area and as member of the Federal office.



cussion is primarily centered around the education being done on national and international policy questions. This is not because the local questions are not of vital importance, but because work in the broader areas is newer and much more under discussion.

One of the problems facing States planning to enter or expand this field of education is whether the work will be most successful and useful to the people if it is done purely as public affairs education, or if it is done as a part of existing extension work in commodity meetings or with commodity groups. This is a difficult choice and both have a place but the choice affects, among other things, the placing of responsibility for the work.

It should be recognized that in dealing with public policy that the role of the extension specialist is somewhat different than that in some of the older extension activities. The specialist cannot be a "salesman" for a public policy as they often have been for certain production, marketing, or farm management practices that they knew would be of value to farmers. In public policy education the specialist must provide the people with the information that will aid them to make a decision but refrain from saying which course of action the individual should follow. It is up to the farmer to decide what is the best policy in light of the facts and his personal valuation.

It is generally agreed that this can best be done through some type of group discussion which will help bring various personal valuations in line with basic facts and bring forth different points of view to broaden the discussion so that the decisions will result in a real "public" policy.

There is some doubt if this type of discussion can be done if the work is done entirely in meetings called for other subject matter or commodity purposes. In the first place these meetings are not likely to result in the type of discussion desired as most of the people will have the same views and problems. These meetings will be helpful to discuss the policy problems of a particular commodity, but unless the work results in a better understanding of the wider aspects of the problems we may merely cause the various groups to draw further apart on questions of national policy.

This does not mean that work done with commodity groups or speeches given at meetings of such interest groups are not an important part of public policy education, but that this is not the entire job. Some States feel that because of a shortage of personnel they must do the work through commodity marketing specialists. Some have also indicated they think the work is less subject to attack by tying the work to commodity problems. However, it is not a question of the number of persons available to do the work. It is a question of whether public policy education is to be regarded as an extension activity as an entity, or as a minor part of other going activities. If it is adopted as a program the size of the staff merely limits the number of people that can be reached. There may be some doubts as to the long-time future of the work if it is merely spread around as a minor part of other work.

In nearly all cases the work in public policy education is being done by extension economists. The work includes, or should include, more than economics. Certainly political scientists, sociologists, and many others have much to add to our understanding of national and international affairs. To leave them out will mean the program is not doing the job it should and could do. One of the greatest problems



facing a State anticipating work in this field is to establish ways to tap the non-extension resources of the universities to aid the extension economists in public affairs education.

### How the Work is Being Done

When the work in public policy education is considered as a separate program the problem of methodology comes to the fore. The work, as such, is relatively new and materials and methods used by the States vary considerably. This is very desirable at this stage of the work as it gives the States planning to enter the work the advantage of being able to study and gain from the experiences of other States.

On several points all of the States agree. One point is that the public policy education should result in raising the general economic and political literacy of the people so that they will be equipped to make future policy decisions as well as decisions respecting the particular program under discussion. To accomplish this several things are needed. The first requirement is presentation of the basic economic facts pertinent to the policy problem under discussion. Another important point is that each individual be allowed to form his own opinion as to the best policy. These may vary from person to person depending upon his personal valuations and beliefs. If the extension specialist tries to get everyone to agree with his personal opinion the program may be attacked as propaganda, perhaps justifiably so.

The present work in the States having rather extensive projects in public policy education varies somewhat in purpose, methodology, and materials used. For the purpose of this summary they might be broken roughly into three general categories

#### I. Attempts to reach a large audience through discussion leader training and discussion pamphlets.

Several States use methods and materials that fall within this general category. This approach to the job of public policy education has several marked features:

- (a) Most of the work is centered around organized discussion groups such as Farm Bureau, Grange, Farmers' Union, Rotary, Extension Home Demonstration groups, etc.
- (b) Work of the extension specialist is largely limited to preparation of material and discussion leader training.
- (c) Discussion material is distributed to local leaders and they are expected to lead local discussions from it. Leader training may often be handled by county agricultural agents or home demonstration agents.

The discussion material in this case is usually an entity in itself so that a person getting it would have some of the basic facts for the subject under discussion. Several of these pamphlets handle controversial issues by presenting the "pros" and "cons" of the issue with little or no attempt to analyze the arguments or to say which side is correct. Available statistics or facts on both sides are given and the weighing of these and the final choice is left to the individual in the local discussion groups.



This pro and con method of presentation has been criticized in some quarters. Some say that there are not two sides to economic questions and that presenting two misleads the people. Another question raised is whether county agents and especially local discussion leaders have the training and background to lead discussions on such subjects. It has also been suggested that the discussion pamphlets do not carry enough basic economic information to enable persons to make a sound decision on the policy in question and that it is desirable to do a better job but reach fewer persons.

The questions raised about the ability of the local discussion leaders to use the materials are probably valid. There may also be some question as to the depth of the background material that can be presented in a popular discussion pamphlet. The presentation of both sides of a policy alternative for discussion is a matter that may be defended. Those who defend it say that value judgment as well as economic analysis plays a part in the individual's decision. They say that giving both sides of a question helps point out inconsistent value judgments and bring them in line with economic analysis.

The States that have used the popular discussion pamphlets have found that they are excellent stimulators for public policy work. They have aroused much interest among the organizations and people and made them more receptive to further basic work in the economic principles underlying our present policy issues. Most of the States that have used discussion pamphlets have added other methods as the interest and support for the work grew.

## II. Work with limited numbers using the "alternative policies" analysis.

This approach is designed primarily to be used by well-trained extension specialists directly with farmers or farm leaders. A public problem is usually chosen that is of current interest. The specialist outlines the problem that is faced and then offers several alternative policies to solve the problem and the consequences likely to occur from each. When this method is used there is little material other than basic figures or tables put in the hands of the people. The policy alternatives discussed are not always associated with actual proposals, but are often theoretical policies somewhat removed from political reality.

Several questions have also been asked regarding this approach. Some persons ask if it is possible to discuss all of the policy alternatives, or does the specialist pick the ones he wants particularly to build up or tear down? It also may be difficult, if not impossible, for the specialist to discuss the consequences of any policy without applying personal value judgments as well as economic analysis. The annual report of a State using this method points up this problem, "We do not believe the educator should advocate any one solution over the others except as the weight of the basic facts does so." It should be remembered that weighing of the basic facts involves personal valuation and the advocacy of any policy as a basis of this weighing can become propaganda. It would seem that the choice of these alternatives should be left to the individual after he has weighed and discussed the basic facts.

Another question might be raised as to the ability of the people to apply the alternatives to later policy questions, especially if they are not provided with a written analysis of the policy alternatives to use with the supporting background figures and tables.



If this method is used with the same group over a period of time it undoubtedly will provide them with the basic economic background to analyze programs as they appear. It probably requires more training on the part of the specialist if he is to avoid personal bias in his analysis of the alternatives. The number of persons that can be reached is reduced by requiring direct specialist contact but this may be offset by the more thorough job that the specialist should do.

### III. Social science education for selected leaders using the "means-ends" analysis.

This method of doing public policy education is used entirely to train selected leaders in the basic principles of the social sciences. Some attempt is made to coordinate the training with current policy questions in the State where this method is used.

Under this method the selected leaders are called together with an extension economist. The meeting begins by discussing a problem and having the people choose the ends they desire to achieve through a public policy. After the ends have been chosen the specialist explains and analyzes the means or alternate means that will reach the desired ends. The people are then given a chance to ask questions or discuss the means that the specialist has laid out and the choice of means or methods is left to the individual.

This approach has also been questioned. It is not always possible to separate means and ends so that the specialist may be evaluating ends as well as means. If so, there may be elements of personal valuation as well as basic education involved. Another question has been raised about the ability of the average farmer to absorb social science education at this level. There is no doubt that a program of this type carried on over a number of years should materially raise the economic literacy of the leaders with whom the work is done, if they can absorb it. This type of program requires extensive personal contacts by the specialist and limits the number of persons that can be reached. One State using this method reports "There is a real hunger among both farm and non-farm people for a basic understanding of the international situation. This demand has become so widespread that it cannot be met by meetings conducted by specialists. The State program committee and our county staff both are beginning to recognize that the specialist's time can best be used in preparing materials and training county staff and local leaders for follow-up meetings. This is likely to be the new development in public affairs education."

### Which Method Is Best?

There obviously is no single best method of doing education in public policy. Each method has advantages and disadvantages and all of them have much in common. All of the methods discussed employ group discussion as part of their teaching technique. All of the States agree that the ultimate end is to aid the farmer in making intelligent decisions about public policies as they are presented.

If a State has the cooperation of a farm organization the broad discussion pamphlet approach is probably the only way to serve a large number of people. To be effective it requires a thorough training of the county agents in techniques of discussion leadership. The "several alternatives" approach and the "means-ends" approach probably require better-trained and more skilled specialists as they must



explain and evaluate the policy alternatives without letting personal biases interfere. These methods are much slower and probably more thorough.

It is likely that most State programs in public policy education will evolve into a combination of these methods. Those persons thought to be leaders in public affairs probably will be given direct contact with the State specialist while more extensive coverage is achieved through some type of discussion pamphlet. The leader training to supplement the discussion pamphlet will probably be done largely by the county agricultural agents. In some States where the work has progressed the farthest the people doing the work indicate they are moving in this direction.

This discussion has dealt with methods used to do public policy education as an individual extension project. It does not attempt to deal with the great amount of public policy education done through radio forums, personal conferences, summer schools, and public speeches. All of these are useful and important and have been done to some extent in nearly every State. The main emphasis has been on methods and problems of doing the work directly with the general public since this appears to be the point to which the work eventually evolves and where the most thinking and ideas are needed.

#### The Role of the Federal Extension Office

There has been a rapid increase in public policy work resulting from a series of regional conferences in the fall of 1950 sponsored by the Farm Foundation. Because of the interest aroused by these conferences the National Advisory Committee on Agricultural Policy, whose activities are financed by the Farm Foundation, appointed four subcommittees to prepare material for consideration at a national conference at Allerton Park, Illinois, from September 10-13, 1951. Each committee consisted of three extension economists from the States and one economist from the Federal Extension Service. Each committee was assigned one of these four policy questions; Inflation, International Relationships, Agricultural Production Policy, and Interrelationships of Agriculture and Other Segments of Our National Economy. The material prepared by these committees will be made available to the States for their use in public policy education.

Discussion with State workers active in this field suggests that one of the major roles that can be performed by members of the Federal Extension office is assistance in the preparation of background material for the use of all States. If some of this work can be done through committees of State representatives, as in the summer of 1951, its value would be greatly enhanced. It would probably not be wise for the Federal Extension office to prepare material on public policies for direct use with rural people in the States. Such material will need adaptation to individual State conditions, the persons presenting it, and the methods by which it is used. But the State workers would appreciate material from the Federal office that will aid them in this job.

It was suggested by most persons that the Federal office should have a man who could spend full time in the field of public policy. Since much of the activity affecting public policy is concerned with national affairs, it was generally felt that the State workers definitely needed someone to act as their eyes and ears on the Federal level. The primary function suggested for this man would be to inform State workers of changes or possible changes in Government policies and to



obtain, sort, and call to the attention of State workers any materials or information issued by Federal agencies that had bearing on matters of interest to policy workers. It was felt that this work would not be effective unless the person doing it was able to establish close personal contacts with the various agencies within the Department of Agriculture and other Federal agencies.

A 1950 survey indicated that there were about 24 States where extension work in public policy was recognized as a part of the program of the extension economists. It was being given major consideration in 9 States and in 15 others was carried as a part-time assignment of several staff members. The work was not absent in the other 24 States. In 10 of them some work was being done, often by teaching or research staffs. Only 14 States reported they could do nothing in the field at that time. The stimulation and aid received from the four regional conferences in 1950 and the national conferences in 1950 and 1951 have undoubtedly already appreciably altered this picture.

Probably the greatest factor retarding the work in the States is the shortage of funds and adequately trained personnel. This suggests another important role that can be performed by the Federal Extension office, that of spending sufficient time in States desiring assistance to help them organize the work, train personnel, and aid in establishing the most effective methods for teaching in the public policy field. In order to adequately perform this type of assistance, members of the Federal office would need to be familiar with the programs and methods used in the States with successful programs in public policy. This exchange of experience and ideas among the States could be greatly facilitated by the Federal office and would add a great deal to the progress of the work.



